

Manuel Guerra Residence & Store
Main Plaza and Hidalgo Street
Roma, Texas

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
Western Office, Division of Design and Construction
San Francisco, California

MANUEL GUERRA RESIDENCE & STORE

Roma, Starr County, Texas

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ADDRESS: Main Plaza and Hidalgo Streets
OWNER: Guerra Estate
OCCUPANT: Pablo Guerra
USE: Residence on upper floor unused; lower floor
used as a commercial retail space.

PART I: HISTORICAL INFORMATION

Manuel Guerra was born in Mier in 1856. From Mier he moved across the border to Roma, Texas. Ultimately, he married Virginia Cox, daughter of Noah Cox, a lawyer who came to the border country from Lima, Ohio in the eighteen fifties. Manuel Guerra became a merchant during the golden age of the border trade, and extended his activities to include many interests. The Manuel Guerra store is reminiscent of the early renaissance in Florence, where merchant princes made great strides in establishing and furthering the culture of a region.

The architect-builder responsible for the structure was Heinrich Portscheller. When and where Portscheller met Guerra is unknown. Portscheller, like Guerra, resided at one time in Mier; and though Portscheller was fifteen years the senior of the two, it is probable that an acquaintanceship occurred some time before construction. The date on the building is 1878, and this date probably notes the founding of the enterprise rather than the actual construction of the building. There is a contract on record between Portscheller and M. Guerra for the construction of a two story house and store---this contract being dated January 25, 1884.

Manuel Guerra died on the 9th of June, 1916. Virginia Cox Guerra continued to occupy the residential portion until her death in 1937. Since this time, the upstairs has remained unused.

Biographical data on the architect-builder has been accumulated, and this information should be of interest. Heinrich Portscheller was born in Germany about 1840. After spending some time with the Prussian army, he presumably deserted with a fellow soldier by the name of Frederick Ellert. Ultimately, the two soldiers found themselves in the port of Vera Cruz, Mexico,

about 1865. They were immediately impressed into the Imperial army of Maximilian. It is probable that they were assigned to an extremely mobile unit labeled 'contre-guerillas,' whose duty was the very strenuous activity against Liberal guerilla units in northern Mexico.

As relations between various European states began to disintegrate on the continent, national groups represented by these countries fighting as allies for Maximilian in Mexico began not only to question the loyalty of each other, but began to concern themselves regarding the support of Maximilian's cause. There was much pressure by agents of General Mariano Escobedo to desert; and, by mid 1866, many Germans were reported to have deserted 'contre-guerilla' units as they moved northward into Tamaulipas. The Liberal General Escobedo hoped to forge deserters into a common fighting unit, feeling that individuals fighting with the threat of a noose about their necks would prove formidable foes against the forces of Maximilian.

It is not known precisely when Ellert and Portscheller deserted, but Ellert is reported as residing in Rio Grande City by early June, 1866; and it seems reasonable that Portscheller was residing in the same neighborhood.

At any rate, both men participated on the Liberal side under General Escobedo in the Battle of Santa Gertrudis, which occurred about two miles east of the village of Camargo on the 15th of June, 1866. This battle resulted in the absolute defeat of the Imperial forces engaged--the participants defeated consisting of about 300 Austrians and 1000 Mexicans. A French garrison occupying the nearby town of Mier during this action made no attempt to succor their allies, but sacked the town of Mier and retreated southward on hearing of the outcome at the battle of Camargo.

Ellert returned to Rio Grande City following the engagement near Camargo, and it is believed that Portscheller came with him. Ellert was married about 1870; and, though he was probably on the Rio Grande, Portscheller's whereabouts are undetermined until we find record of his marriage to Leonarda Campos in Mier about 1879. It is probable that Portscheller developed confidence in others as to his abilities as a 'baumeister' during this unknown period (his age about 30-39). The principle buildings at Ringgold Barracks were begun in 1869 and completed by 1875. Portscheller was probably employed as a mason in this work.

At any rate, the Portschellers at first resided in Mier (where their first of four children was born in 1881); but by 1883 had moved across the river to Roma, Texas.

In Roma, Portscheller established the very necessary brickyard for the manufacture of a very attractive, salmon buff, sand struck, large (2 3/4 by 4 1/8 by 8 3/4 inches) brick. In partnership with him were a Mr. Margo and a Mr. Perez.

By October 29, 1884, Portscheller had made known his intentions of becoming an American citizen.

Local masons considered it quite an honor to work for Portscheller, and he was never without an abundance of apprentices. One mason interviewed in Rio Grande City (Don Jose Barbosa) worked for Portscheller for three years. Don Jose mentioned that Don Enrique (Portscheller) would prepare the plans, make templates for the mouldings, and then the other masons would rub or cut the bricks to the profiles determined. Most of the patterned work, as well as the intricate mouldings or friezes would be laid up by Portscheller himself with the fill-in work executed by the other masons. Portscheller's handling of scale and proportion must be acknowledged as that of an inspired artist of the highest order.

Two items of interest in terms of construction are as follows: For one thing, fermented cactus juice was used as an additive in the mortar. Leaves of the petaya (echinocereus enneacanthus) and the nopal (opuntia lindheimeri) were chopped quite finely and allowed to steep for several weeks prior to use. The liquor thus fermented was then mixed into the mortar. This practice is traditional in the nearby Rio Grande City area. No one seems to know its origin or why it was done. Two suggestions are that this acid material will counteract the high saline ('salitre') content of the local soil. The other opinion is that it is a binding agent in the mortar itself. The other item of interest is that lime was burned locally using mesquite as a fuel.

Some of the masons who worked for Portscheller were Placido Palacios, Ensenbio Cabazos, Pancho Lopez, Margarto Garza, Adolfo Hinojosa, and Poncio Caneles.

In 1894, Portscheller moved his wife and four children to Laredo. He built many houses and cisterns there, an iron bridge in south Laredo, and the old St. Peter's Church.

About 1900, he went to Monterrey to build buildings for the college, returning to Laredo afterwards. He died in 1915, aged 75, and is buried in the Protestant cemetery at Laredo.

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PART II: ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

- A. Architectural Interest and Merit: This structure is of great interest to the historian as well as the architect; and ultimately, will be of considerable interest to the tourist enjoying nearby Falcon reservoir. The relationship of the building to the plaza and church, the very good cast iron balcony, and the excellent use of rubbed brick mouldings (as well as other patterned brickwork) make it a structure of great interest. The building was utilized as a set for a movie called 'Viva Zapata' some years ago.

The condition of the fabric is fair, which is probably a result of the benefits of the arid region which surrounds the village of Roma.

8. Technical Description of the Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: One hundred and twenty feet by one hundred and twenty feet (entire complex).
2. Foundations: Unknown. Probably continuous brick bearing on underlying sandstone.
3. Wall construction: Brick bearing wall.
4. Porches, stoops, bulkheads. Cast iron balcony at second floor level on south and west facades.
5. Chimneys. Brick.
6. Openings. Doorways and doors. In general, double doors on exterior both upstairs and down. Four panel cypress in pine frames. Rubbed brickwork mouldings at heads; glass transoms. Windows, four light double hung with louvred shutters.
7. Roof. Pitched toward patio or court at rear (north). Chipichil concrete originally covered with tile. Cornice of patterned brick on south and west elevations.

C. Technical Description of the Interior.

1. Floor Plans. Large warehousing and retailing space on lower floor, with open court in rear, servants quarters and animal storage areas. Second floor is residential space for owner, consisting of rooms opening to plaza and to inner court.
2. Stairway. Wood.
3. Flooring. Pine.
4. Wall and ceiling finish. Plastered walls. Beaded pine ceilings with joists exposed.
5. Trim. Wood.
6. Hardware. Not significant.
7. Lighting. Original lighting kerosene, but it has been wired electrically.
8. Heating. Fireplaces and cast iron stoves.

D. Site.

1. Orientation. Principal facade opens to south.
2. Enclosures. Patio completely enclosed by buildings or by high brick wall.
3. Outbuildings. Stables and servants quarters open in to patio.
4. Walks, driveways, etc. Brick
5. Landscaping, gardens, etc. None extant. Remnants of planting imply that there was once a landscape scheme.

PREPARED BY M. Eugene George, Jr. A.S.A. 24 February 1962

APPROVED Charles S Pope DATE 2 April 1962

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